

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Yetta Bidegain

DATE OF BIRTH: May 2, 1927 SEX: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 13, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Mrs. Bidegain's home near Tucumcari, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: May 9, 1997

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Jane Allen

DATE ABSTRACTED: December 13, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Mrs. Bidegain is a member of a New Mexico ranching family and served on both the Museum Foundation and the Musuem Board. At the time of the interview she was a member of the State Museum Board. Mrs. Bidegain discusses her early years and ancestry and her participation in the Museum's founding.

DATE RANGE: 1880-1996

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE:

Jane O'Cain meets with Yetta Kohn Hoover Bidegain at her home near Tucumcari, New Mexico, to discuss the founding of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum. Late in the interview, Mrs. Bidegain's husband, Phillip Bidegain, joins Jane O'Cain and Mrs. Bidegain. Mrs. Bidegain explains that her father died when she was six and her mother later married Dr. Thomas B. Hoover who adopted Yetta, hence her name Hoover. At one time Mrs. Bidegain served on the Foundation Board; however, at the time of the interview she was a member of the Museum Board.

Mrs. Bidegain briefly describes her ancestry and early life. Born at home on May 2, 1927, her mother was attended by Dr. Ferguson, a physician from Tucumcari, and later had the services of a nurse in caring for Yetta, an only child. The father died in 1933. The mother continued the family business on her own, repeating the experience of Yetta's father's mother who continued the family business after the death of her spouse in the 1880s.

Mrs. Bidegain relates that her father's family immigrated from Bavaria to the U.S. and ended up in Las Vegas in 1902, where in addition to homesteading he was in partnership with Ilfeld for a short time. The family, three brothers and one sister, purchased one-fourteenth interest in the Pablo Montoya land grant; in addition, they homesteaded and had a large mercantile business in the town of Montoya, maintaining a partnership in both the business and the management of their homesteads and at the same time buying up homesteads from others.

Mrs. Bidegain's mother's parents came to New Mexico from the South in the early 1920s because of the husband's poor health; Mrs. Bidegain's mother arrived in 1922. Pearl Baker's (Mrs. Bidegain's mother's mother) father was a developer in the South and there met her husband, Leonard McGowan. Mrs. Bidegain's mother had gone to business school, and when she came to New Mexico she went to work for Mrs. Bidegain's father in his store, and the two married in 1923. She kept books for the Kohn Mercantile Store and worked on the ranch.

In 1938 Mrs. Bidegain's mother married Dr. Thomas B. Hoover, a physician and surgeon in Tucumcari, and in that year they built the house in which the interview is taking place for \$25,000, not including the architect's fee. Mrs. Bidegain attended Radford School for Girls in El Paso during the drought in the early thirties, when it became necessary for the family to take their cows to the state of Chihuahua in Mexico for pasture. She notes that during the drought the government paid to have cows killed and that some of her family's cows met this fate. She came back and finished the eighth grade in Tucumcari. During World War II, Dr. Hoover was stationed in Fort Sam Houston; the family bought a house in San Antonio and Mrs. Bidegain was again sent away to school for two years, this time to the Brownmoor School for Girls in Santa Fe. She graduated from high school in Tucumcari in 1944.

Mrs. Bidegain briefly discusses the curriculum at Brownmoor, noting that she was behind some of the girls who were from Lake Forest, Illinois, and other states in the U.S. She says she has fond memories of the school and was not as homesick there as she had been when she had been away from home at Radford.

Mrs. Bidegain tells about how her mother kept records of the businesses that existed in Montoya in 1917 as well as writing down stories told by the father, and that her grandmother had similar historical interests. She also tells of Sharon Niederman's interest in the family because the father

was Jewish. The family, one of several Jewish families in Tucumcari, did not practice Judaism. However, when her father died, her mother had a rabbi come from El Paso for the service. Her father, she says, spoke good Spanish and was fond of all the Hispanics, and after he died her mother donated money for a window in the Catholic Church.

The discussion returns to the Brownmoor School curriculum, which Mrs. Bidegain says emphasized basic academics as opposed to being a finishing school. Outdoor activities included horseback riding and skiing.

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO:

Mrs. Bidegain notes that the Brownmoor School moved from Santa Fe to Scottsdale and a few years later one of the ladies who ran it died and the school closed.

After completing her high school education in 1944, Mrs. Bidegain attended the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she met her husband and married in 1948. They returned to the Conchas Dam area where the husband managed ranches until they returned to Tucumcari. They have a son, born in 1949, who manages their ranch, and a daughter, born in 1952.

Mrs. Bidegain tells about her husband's ancestry. His parents, who were Basque, immigrated to the U.S. from "the old country" and were ranchers in Arizona, first in Flagstaff and later around Benson and Wilcox. Phillip Bidegain, her husband, came from a family of seven boys and one girl, several of whom achieved a college education by working their way through college. The Bidegain parents raised both cattle and sheep on their ranch in Arizona.

Asked about her involvement with the local historical society, Mrs. Bidegain notes that the Quay County Historical Society was sponsoring a program the following day. The local historical society has a small museum in Tucumcari that housed a collection started by Herman Moncus in his drug store who then gave it to the Tucumcari Historical Research Institute.

Asked about her affiliation with agricultural institutions, Mrs. Bidegain notes that she belongs to the New Mexico Cattle Growers and Hereford Association, the Quarter Horse Association, "things of that nature." She indicates that the Bidegains raise quarter horses on their ranch for their own use. Asked about her experience with horsemanship at Brownmoor School, she notes that the riding there was western style riding and speaks again of her fond memories of the school and of the other students there.

Asked about her early experiences on the ranch, she indicates that most of her experience had to do with managerial matters, that she never roped or "anything like that." Her university degree, she says, was in animal husbandry.

The conversation shifts to Mrs. Bidegain's participation in the founding of the Museum. She doesn't remember exactly when the first meeting was held. She indicates that the original idea came from a museum at Texas Tech. She attended an early meeting concerning how the Museum was to be supported financially. She doesn't remember exactly how the invitations were sent out, but thinks she got a letter. The founding was slow to get started. She credits Bill Stephens and Felicia Thal for pushing the idea through and doing a good job and mentions Helmuth Naumer as someone who also did a good job. She expresses her opinion that the Museum should be under the Office of Cultural Affairs because of their understanding of the museum business and the issues concerning funding. She indicates that at one time the people on the Board or the Foundation had to sign personal notes to get the lease. She had hoped they would be able to

depend on private industry for funding. When the Governor appointed the Museum Board she says she felt there was some resentment by the Foundation members.

Mrs. Bidegain says that as a trustee for Dr. Hoover's property near Tucumcari she offered the State about fifteen acres near I-40 and Road 209, but the Board looked at the land and decided that it was not enough land. Early thinking was that the Museum should be on the New Mexico State University campus, then a golf course site, and then Dripping Springs Road where it was built.

Money was difficult to raise, she says, and she was concerned about conflict that arose associated with the Hispanic Heritage Center that is now located in Albuquerque. Asked who in the Legislature had been significant in the Museum development, she says that Mr. McSherry "has always been good support," as well as legislators from Doña Ana County. Helmuth Naumer was also instrumental in getting the first money from the Legislature.

Asked what the primary mission or goal of the Museum should be, Mrs. Bidegain says she at first was struck by the Museum's use to preserve records and other materials but that as the Museum idea grew she became aware of how important it was as an educational facility.

TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE:

She speaks about how little local children know about animals and land and about how little they know about the difficulty of women's lives in the "early days."

Asked about water resources on the ranch at Montoya, Mrs. Bidegain notes that although there were wells at the ranch headquarters, a water company hauled water to the ranch and sold water by the barrel and by the bucket. In addition, there was a good well near the creek that runs west of Montoya that the railroad used.

Mrs. Bidegain comments that she is very impressed with the programs offered by the Museum and about how complicated the job of running a museum is. She talks about the difficulty in arriving at a logo for the Museum and says she is "really happy" with the one that was adopted and its meaningfulness in view of her attendance at the ground breaking and seeing the horse riders come over the hill.

Asked if she thought people in her part of the state were knowledgeable about the Museum, Mrs. Bidegain says, "Definitely not." She speaks about the difficulty of getting word out to people in her area and of how important having a building, something concrete, to show people is in fund raising.

Asked how the Museum might best memorialize Dr. Stephens's contributions, she suggests a plaque or a picture. Asked what her hopes might be for the future of the Museum, she says she thinks the Museum should own the land it's on and should not be a part of New Mexico State University. She says she does not expect the Museum to become self-supporting, that she doesn't think any other museum in the state is self-sufficient.

Asked if she knows other farming and ranching families that O'Cain should interview, she refers O'Cain to her husband Phillip who is at that moment entering the room. He suggests Albert Branch of Newkirk, the Libby's, and the Gallegoses.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B: Blank